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“THE 65%: STRANGERS SUBORDINATE TO THE NEW-BORN STONE FOREST”

Investigation of Living Conditions of Female Migrant
Workers in Shenzhen

A female migrant worker serving
as waitress in a Donkey hotpot
restaurant, cleaning up the tables
for the customers. Photo by
Manager Lei who owns the
restaurant

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INTRODUCTION

Clad in a grey coat, the 21-year-old girl hurries to work as a saleswoman in one the most central region of Shenzhen. She had been here for 4 years, but still cannot claim the city as home.

In Shenzhen, one of the fastest growing cities in China, millions of female migrant workers silently complete their work, females who migrate mostly from rural areas of China to Shenzhen seeking for jobs and opportunities, rarely interacting with the local population. They are also separated from the locals as they don't possess a Shenzhen "HUKOU" (a household registration record of an individual in Chinese system, which officially identifies a person as a resident of an area, assigning benefits based on agricultural and non-agricultural residency status). But it is these people who form the foundation of the beauty of Shenzhen.

Our study, through questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews of 17 representative members of the female migrant workers from 3 different workplace, unveils 3 aspects about the living conditions of such social group that are "unique": social position, financial status, and social identity. Furthermore, divisions —based on financial ability and occupational status quo — are found to exist within the group. What can be the cause?



the process of interviewing the workers in hotpot restaurant
photo by Manager Lei in the restaurant

THEIR VOICE: AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HIERARCHY

“Our income is too low for consuming these things. We don’t expect that much.”

When the dawn fades and radiant sunshine spreads across the Donkey hotpot shop embedded at the heart of hills and lakes in the suburbs of Shenzhen, dozens of migrant workers start getting up at dormitories provided by their boss. Usually women are cleaning the floors and arranging tables and seats as waitresses.

“Most of us come from Sichuan and Hunan(Sichuan and Hunan are the two provinces adjacent to Guangdong). Our boss is from Sichuan, too. The working hours are pretty unsure. Sometimes we have to stay up till midnight when customers keep staying here having Yexiao, but we have no other choice,” one of the waitress named Hong explained to us. She is about 50 years old, with dark skin exposed under sunlight.

“We have no high-level academic qualification. Most of us have come to Shenzhen for at least 3 years and manual labour is probably the only thing we can do. Positions like managers are out of the reach of our hands and are the exclusive province of the natives,” As we discovered, many admitted that they never thought about promotions here. Having stable income per month is what they dare to care about most; plans such as buying flats or welfare privileges seldom appear in their minds. “Our income is too low for consuming these things. We don’t expect that much.”

Nearly every one of them claim that staying in Shenzhen is better than in their hometown where many of them suffered from extreme poverty. However, a salary of around 3500RMB per month clearly cannot satisfy daily consumption in the Shenzhen. In fact, as we dig deeper into their stories, rather than going to the city center, they prefer to dance in the park near their dormitory where a mass number of migrant workers accumulate. They had no access to metropolitan life. They are in the periphery of the megacity.

THEIR VOICE: CAN'T MAKE ENDS MEET

Thirty kilometers away, in the city center of Shenzhen, another group of migrant workers are occupied in Sichuan Building (a 3-star hotel with Chuan-flavored restaurant provided in Shenzhen). As the 10 friendly migrant workers introduced themselves, we found out that each of them have come from Sichuan to work in Shenzhen for an average of 7 years, and most of them now earned salaries ranging from 3500 to 5000RMB as managers in the hotel service industry.

“There are just a lot of pressure living here. Everything is so expensive. We can hardly afford the rents. Buying an apartment here is an impossible dream for us. You see, we cannot even save any money after spending on commodities every month.”

Zhang is not the only one who complained about the high costs of living among the group. Chen and Wong claimed that they even lived in the dormitory to save from the costs of renting apartment. Words like “expensive,” “high costs of living,” and “not enough salaries” occurred a lot. In fact, most of them are very satisfied with their jobs. It is just the question of: what I can do with my 4000 RMB when the city takes away 3000 RMB from me to survive here each month. For most of the female migrant workers here, daily expenses have already taken up from 70% to above 95% of their total expenditure.

Life becomes even tougher when speaking of children. For 3 of the parents who have their kids in Shenzhen, the issue is on public school. By policy, unless the kids has a Shenzhen “HUKOU”, they have to earn enough “credits” in order to study at public schools that are free of tuition costs, which is extremely difficult considered the large migrant population and the limited educational resources. Private schools can be an alternative, but the high tuition fee will be another huge expense and heavy burden on the workers’ meager income.

“I have two kids, and the interest-orientated classes for them, like playing musical instruments or drawing outside school, almost cost all my salaries. The rest expenditure relies entirely on my husband’s income. You know, it is also very difficult for my younger son to get into free public school in Shenzhen because of our non-local “HUKOU”. We can either sell all of our property to afford the tuition costs for private schools, or wait and pray for good luck,” said Lai.

THEIR VOICE: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN REAL SHENZHEN RESIDENT

A manager of a high-tech business in her descent dress was sharing her “daily adventure” with us. We are now interviewing 5 migrant workers from a company with a yearly revenue of over 5 billion, indicating the relatively well-off routines of the workers. Most of them perform jobs, with a specific skills required, here: from designing mobile application as engineers to managing human resources.

Speaking of social identity, most of the interviews illustrate their willings of truly integrating into the Shenzhen society whereas they might be excluded by the “xenophobic” locals because of their special identity as migrant workers. As we proceed our interviews, they tell us that some of the locals might require a higher rents while facing tenants from other province, distancing themselves from the migrant workers — who then find it even harder to integrate within the current society.

Talking about sense of community in Shenzhen, the interviewees acknowledge that the amount of savings and the contents of future plans mostly determine whether Shenzhen would be considered as their permanent residence or merely a temporary place for money. “Having a home here? Well, we just cannot afford the skyrocketing price of buying our own apartment,” said Lee, suggesting that ability of buying house might be linked to their sense of belongings as well, “According to the Chinese traditions, if we don’t have our own house here, we don’t have a true home here.”

As a result of feeling excluded by the local residents, the migrant workers then set up their own “exclusive” community as well where most of them interact with people from the same hometown or similar background. “We have our own community and seldom interact with the natives,” said Wong, “the park is the place where we can socialize and seek companionship.”



the process of interview with the migrant worker
photo by Zhang HanYue in SiChuan Building

OUR VIEWPOINT

Glimpse of the overall:

The 17 samples we investigated certainly share similarities in suffering from enormous financial stress and social exclusion. Though most of them admitted that their wages in Shenzhen are much more higher than that in their hometown, which are mostly undeveloped small cities or rural areas, it is still challenging for them to live in such energetic metropolis with fierce competition. Since most of the migrant workers possess no outstanding intellectual capability due to their poorer family background compared with the locals or people who returned with study-abroad experiences in labour market, they are not the target group of high intellectuals, who are favored by Shenzhen government and are the recipient of beneficial policy. The 17 samples all claimed that their welfare received such as healthcare, education opportunities and housing rents were inferior compared to locals. No material guaranteed and being neglected by the government, the female migrant workers in the city find only struggle of living, loneliness and homesickness in Shenzhen rather than sense of belonging. However, surprisingly and noteworthily, the extent of living difficulties also differs among the 17 samples.

Division within the 65%

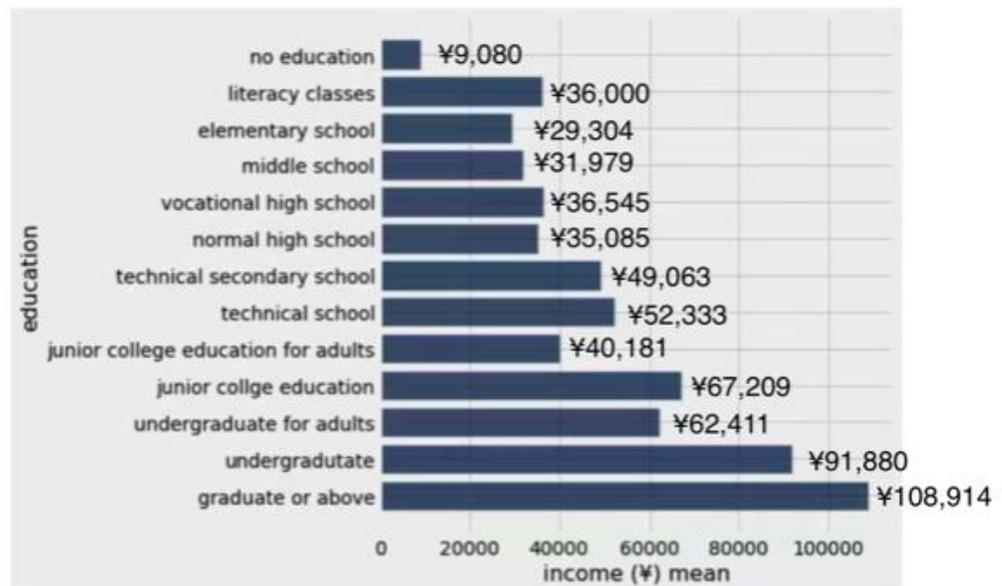
One of the main factors which led to the internal disparity in extent of living difficulties among the 17 samples, despite the fact that they are all female migrant workers, is the level of education received. The difference in their diploma, an indicator of the extent of education received, amplifies the disparity of living difficulties, which is reflected in the different amount of salaries different groups of interviewees earn per month. Most of the high-paid jobs, such as the engineers in the high-tech company, require the migrant workers to acquire profound knowledge related to the area based on its professional nature. This cannot be achieved without the foundation of standard secondary or higher level of education. Consequently, the workers at the Donkey Hotpot restaurant are not capable of working at the high-tech company due to their lack of expertise in computer science, for instance, therefore earning a lower salary. For those who receives salaries only to sustain their daily expenses, they are not financially able to entertain a lot or consider integrating into the current society due to the severe life pressure, thus paying abundant attention to social welfares in order to improve on their quality of life. On the contrary, the workers who receive higher salaries are more financially independent, living a relatively less burdensome, though still stressful, life in Shenzhen thanks to their degree.

OUR VIEWPOINT

Strangers outside Shenzhen

In our previous analysis, we concluded that level of education received correlates with the amount of salary from work. Seeking to verify and generalize this to a larger population, we utilize data from the Chinese General Social Survey in 2015 on the Chinese National Survey Data Archive, which covers a sample of 10968 adults in mainland China. We sort out a total of 556 female migrant workers, based on responses that claimed to have “HUKOU” away from their current city of residence, to be female migrant workers, and select data from questions on their educational level and monthly salaries to form a graph about the two variables. The resultant chart portrays a huge contrast: female migrant workers with higher educational level earn a higher level of income on average, with those claiming to have “no education” earning an average income of ¥9080 while those with educational level “graduate and above” possessing average income of ¥108,914, confirming our assumption about the correlation of education and salary.

Average Monthly Income of migrant workers in respect to Educational Level
in 2015 CGSS* survey



*China General Social Survey

**Chinese National Survey Data Archive

CGSS*

source: CNSDA**

Educational level of graduate or above results in the highest amount of income receive, accounting for over ¥108,000

VISION OF FUTURE

What can we improve for a better future?

As our interviewees suggest, when they come to Shenzhen, they saw it as a robust, developing new city full of opportunities. Most of them are also attracted to Shenzhen because of the propaganda of social welfare policy that claims to encourage and take good care of the coming migrant workers. However, from the feedback of our interviewees, most of them didn't find the social welfares provided to them—as non-local permanent residents and without Shenzhen “HUKOU”—are compatible to the high costs of living, and are disappointed that the government didn't keep their promises”.

Therefore, we hope that the government can put the propaganda into practice further in the future. For instances, to ensure that migrant workers who receive low level of salaries can have subsidies on daily commodities and housing, or to assure the provision of appropriate medical insurances. In this way, an overall better quality of life can be achieved by everyone in this vigorously developing city of Shenzhen.

With such improvements achieved, the living conditions of the migrant workers will be better, though some problems which are rooted in their poor family background cannot be fully resolved